IV. Communication between volunteers and SNA managers

The vehicle that drives a successful volunteer program is communication. Good communication founded on listening and understanding builds trust. Poor communication can hurt trust and drive people away. When expectations are clear, both SNA managers and volunteers can plan for and feel comfortable with future goals. As a result, the volunteer is free to complete projects at their own pace, while the SNA manager is comfortable with what is going on.

A. Yearly management objectives

The regional volunteer coordinator (and SNA manager) and volunteer should develop yearly management objectives of achievable goals to lay out expectations for the year. This may include the timeframe for projects along with a map for relevant work projects. It should remain fairly simple but with enough detail that everyone is on the same page. We suggest the plan include a map of the site with work areas delineated.

A timeline should be determined that fits the needs of the site. Working on the plan in the fall helps evaluate summer results and make adjustments for the following year when thoughts are fresh. Fall plans promote thinking about winter work and the seed collecting that will be needed. The benefit of working on plans in the spring is having ideas fresh in your mind when approaching the busy summer season.

Yearly management objectives are finalized after a site meeting between the SNA manager/regional volunteer coordinator and volunteers, which could occur annually. Use the following sections as guidelines for developing yearly management objectives (adapted from The Stewardship Network's *The Stewardship Manual*).

1. Developing yearly management objectives

Many SNAs already have land management plans created by DNR staff. Consult this document as a starting point to familiarize yourself with the plant communities present, management needs, and future goals for the site.

The level of detail included in your yearly management objectives should correspond to your anticipated amount of work, the resources available, and the size of your work area. Consider the impacts changes to the site will have on users. Is there a trail through the site? Do people hunt there? What are the interests of the users that frequent the site? These users may become advocates for our work if they understand what we are doing.

Become familiar with the history of the site. Is it a remnant plant community? Was there an agricultural use (grazing, plowing, ditches, etc.)? Look at old aerial photos to determine tree density, fields, old roads, houses, etc. What kind of ecosystem was there in the past — a wetland, oak savanna, oak forest, prairie? Is there a history of fire or flooding?

What is the current condition of your site? Does it need fire to maintain the prairie, is it a floodplain forest that relies on frequent flooding, are there too many deer browsing the site, are there high-quality areas that need protection, are there low-quality areas that would be a lot of work to restore?

2. Determining the resources available

This will determine what you can prioritize for and what types of projects will work.

- What equipment is available to you?
- What herbicide do you have? Can you get more?
- What training do you need to provide?
- Who do you have to help you? How much time will they be able to commit? Are there people you might be able to recruit?
- How much time are you willing to commit? Will you work weekly, monthly, quarterly? Do you have more time during a certain season?

3. Determining the site objectives and management approach

What do you want to protect or restore at your site? Why are you working there? What is your objective? You might think your site objective is to remove buckthorn, but your objective is actually to restore oak/hickory forest with a diverse understory. The approach would be to remove buckthorn, which is a stressor to the oak/hickory forest. It might be hard to keep this list relatively short since you really like your site and know there are lots of things to do. Don't get bogged down trying to make lots of goals and targets, keep it simple. Check the information on the SNA webpage for your site to see if the site objectives and management approach (or action steps) are already there.

If site objectives are not determined, volunteers may wish to work with the regional volunteer coordinator to develop them. Here are The Nature Conservancy's strategies for selecting objectives:

- Choose those species and communities for which the site is particularly noted.
- Consider those species and communities that if lost would cause you to stop working at the site.
- Choose species and communities for which it is feasible to meet meaningful goals.
- Target habitat types if they can meet the needs of a wide diversity of communities and species.
- Group species into functional groups or highly sensitive groups.
- Choose several objectives that encompass multiple levels of organization and various spatial and temporal scales.

4. Identifying threats to site objectives

This information may also be present on the SNA webpage description of your site. What are the threats that need to be dealt with? You will most likely not be able to deal with all of them, but you can evaluate which ones are the most important by using criteria like the following:

- Severity (What is the impact of the threat?)
- Scope (How much of your site will it impact?)
- Immediacy (Is it impacting your site now or will it in the future?)
- Likelihood (If it is not impacting your site now, what is the probability of it occurring?)
- Reversibility (Can you address it through restoration or management?)
- Frequency (Is it chronic or intermittent?)

It might be helpful to assign rankings to each threat (e.g., 1-10, high, low, etc.).

5. Management approach

Determine how you will address your threats (e.g., plan a garlic mustard pulling workday, hold tree seed collecting days, map the spread of an invasive species). Other examples of strategies fall into these categories:

- Land protection (local land use decisions, easements)
- Management and restoration (reintroduce fire, plant oaks, stabilize creek banks)
- Community relations (education, partnerships, working with neighbors)
- Programmatic (equipment, people-power, financial resources)
- Research (into best management practices, natural systems, the effects of threats)

The strategies you develop will outline the best approach. Feel free to use creativity or invite others in to help.

6. Prioritizing and developing a timeline for management approaches

Prioritize your strategies. Typical areas of prioritization for land managers might be:

- Keep pristine areas free of invasive species (e.g., sweep through a high-quality savanna area to remove the random Japanese hedge parsley plants)
- Improve semi-degraded ecosystems (e.g., remove invasive species in an oak woodland to improve diversity of native wildflowers)
- Expand existing high-quality areas, merging them when possible (e.g., removing brush separating two prairie remnants or pushing back the edge of brush encroaching on a prairie)
- Create new ecosystems (e.g., removing dense brush and seeding with prairie plants or interseeding into brome fields to create prairie)

Use this information to break priorities down into yearly management objectives and organize them by month. It will be a valuable reference throughout the year.

7. Evaluating success

The best restorationists are those who are constantly learning and reevaluating what they are doing. Take opportunities to see how effective your work is at reaching your targets. Take pride in seeing things change even if they are very slow changes. Here are some ideas for ways to notice changes:

- Establish photopoints (minimally annual pictures in every cardinal direction from the same spot to document large-scale changes). See Section XIII, “Setting up photopoints.”
- Use colored flagging to flag areas of interest (where you are actively working) and keep track of how it changes each year.
- Count the number of plant species that occur each year.

Don't be afraid to come up with different approaches if your current approach is not working.

8. Avoiding feeling bogged down

If you are new to stewarding a site, start small and get your feet wet. If you achieve your initial goals, set them higher for the next year. Restoration work is endless, so it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Simply strive to improve your site. You are a volunteer, so everything you do to improve the site is a bonus for the SNA program. Your work is allowing the program to focus resources elsewhere and/or accomplish new goals. Remember why you got into restoration work in the first place. Have fun! Take others on walks, spend time learning new plants, find new ways to appreciate your site, simply enjoy being out there.

9. Priority invasive species

Some sites have been managed by SNA crews. These sites might have plants that are seen by the SNA manager as priority invasive species and have been removed for many years. It is important to keep managing for these plants so momentum from years of work is not lost. For invasive species that have been labeled a priority by the SNA manager, the volunteer will discuss their removal plan with the SNA manager/regional volunteer coordinator. The volunteer needs to agree to remove the species in a given area or allow the SNA crew to do the removal.

If, for whatever reason, the volunteer recognizes they will not be able to complete removal as agreed upon, they must contact the SNA manager/regional volunteer coordinator to request crew assistance. This is likely to happen if there are more invasive species than expected, the volunteer has other commitments, or other problems arise. The volunteer needs to let the SNA manager/regional volunteer coordinator know at least a week before ideal removal conditions occur. The sooner the SNA manager/regional volunteer coordinator knows, the better they can have resources ready to help.

10. Yearly management objectives example

This is an example of what yearly management objectives might look like. It is a rough estimate of the work planned for the year. It is not set in stone, but helps everyone to be thinking similarly. It may contain more or less detail based on the amount of work being accomplished.

Kettle Moraine Oak Opening Yearly management objectives March 2014 - February 2015

Schedule	Target activity	Location	Priority	Notes
March	Leaf blow fire break	Previous burn units	Medium	Leaf blower, chainsaw, brushcutter needed
March	Continue brush cutting	Kestol prairie	Low	Remove sumac, aspen, during workday
April	Spray knapweed	Bald Bluff, continue expanding sprayed areas on remnant prairie (see map)	Listed on map	
No Snow- mid May	Spray garlic mustard	See map	Medium	In areas with large patches
May 17	Aspen girdling workday	Bald Bluff, check Kestol, search for other areas	Medium	
Mid May- mid June	Garlic mustard pulling	Check areas sprayed, keep an eye out for new populations	Medium	
June 1	Wildflower hike	Ice Age Trail, prairie remnants	Medium	Advertise
June	Aspen girdling	Same as before	Medium	Check areas girdled in May
June	Oriental bittersweet population GPS	Walk areas on map	Medium	Check previous years sprayed populations, spray if necessary
June	Spray knapweed	Check areas where populations are scattered (or previously sprayed)	High	This time of year it will be easy to spot
June	Field trip	Ice Age trail	Medium	Take volunteers from the past year and others interested on a hike to learn and enjoy what has been accomplished
Late June	Yellow sweet clover removal	Areas circled on map will be checked	Priority weed	Search for new areas

Schedule	Target activity	Location	Priority	Notes
Early July	White sweet clover cutting	Search whole site	Priority weed	Plan a workday with others
June- September	Brush maintenance	See map	High	Check and retreat areas worked on during last year's winter
July	Seed collecting early species (shooting stars, kittentails, etc.)	Focus on prairie remnant areas	Medium	Continue to develop a grasp on where good seed populations are
Late July- early August	Remove Japanese Hedge Parsley	Search site where there is partial shade	Priority weed	If there are large patches, a workday may be scheduled
September	Look for oriental bittersweet	Search new areas	High	Bittersweet leaves will be easy to spot since they are yellow, look for other groups (Ice Age trail?) to help out
September 20	Seed collecting workday #1	See map	High	Collect for areas that will be cleared this winter
October 18	Seed collecting workday #2	See map	High	
Early November	Put in firebreaks?	Previous burn units	?	Check with SNA program if burn is a priority
Early November	Start creating small brush piles	Southern brush patches - see map	Medium	Get piles started and ready for upcoming workdays
November 15	Brush cutting workday	Southern brush patches - see map	High	
January 17	Brush cutting workday	Expand bald bluff area	High	

Table 1. Example of yearly management objectives from Kettle Moraine Oak Opening SNA.

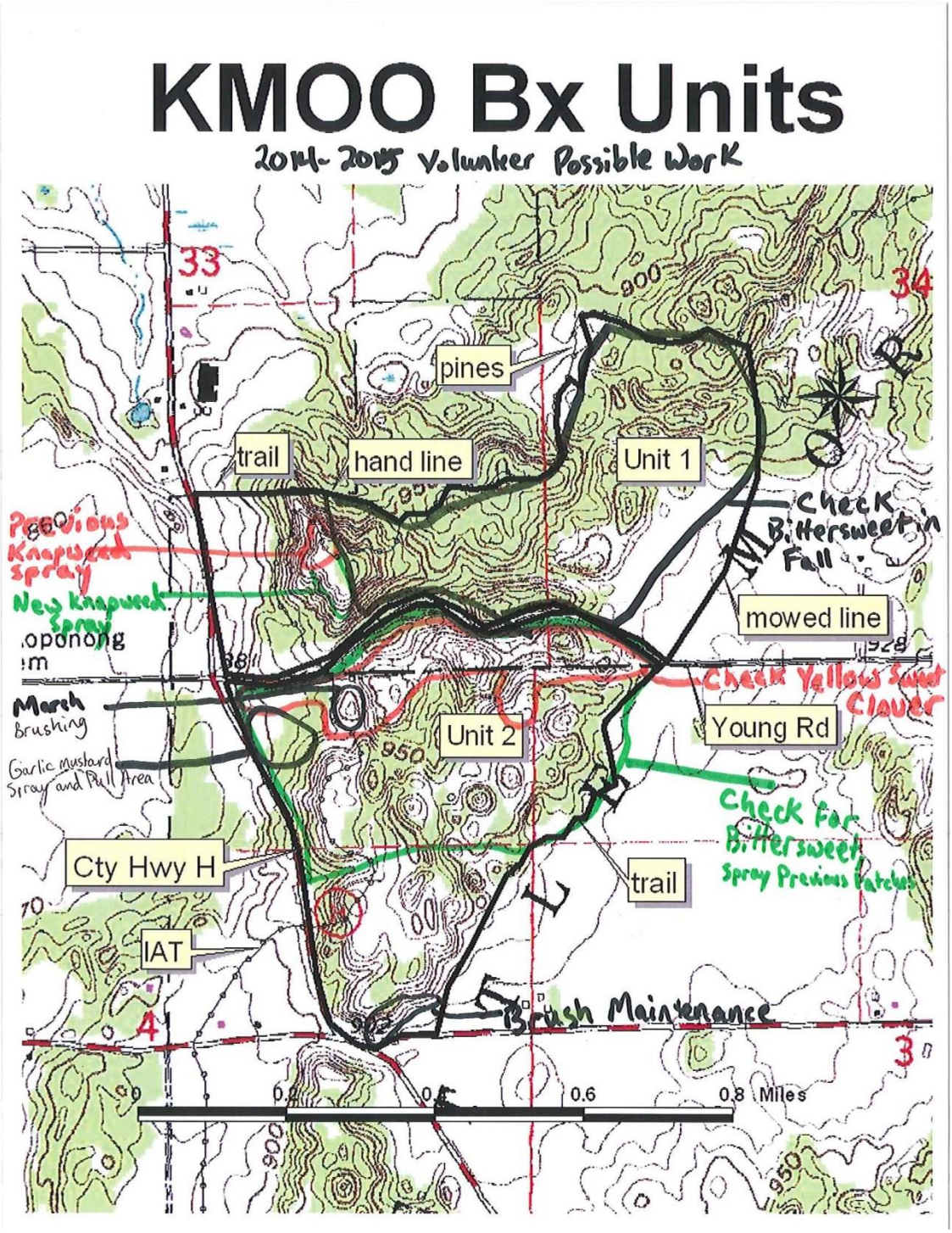

Figure 2. Example of yearly management objectives map for Kettle Moraine Oak Opening SNA.

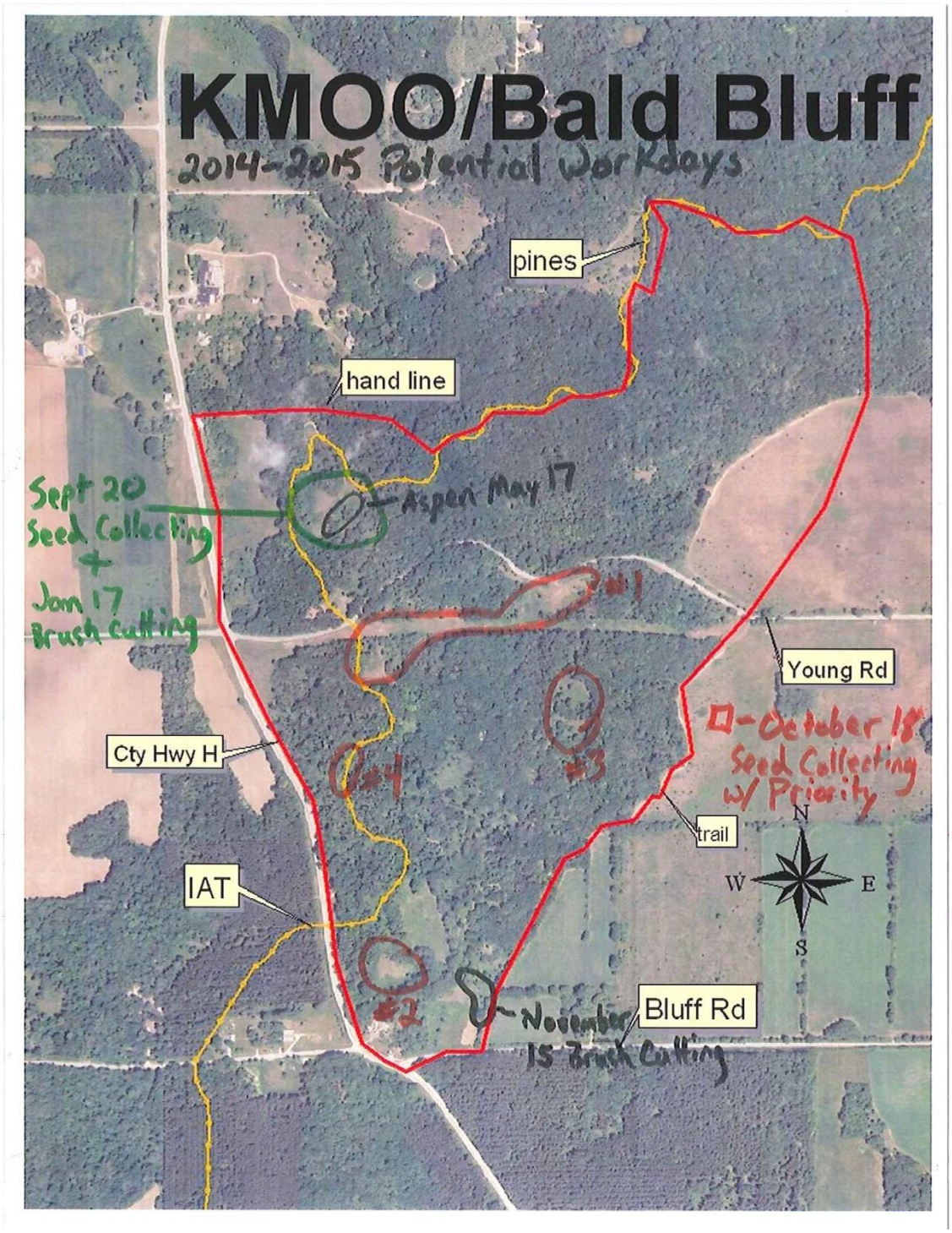

Figure 3. Example of yearly management objectives map for planned workdays at Kettle Moraine Oak Opening SNA.

B. Reporting

Thorough reporting is needed to strengthen grant requests, capture the work being done each year, learn from past experiences, and transfer knowledge to future stewards. Reporting is done through the online work log http://wiatri.net/projects/vollogs/.

The volunteer work log contains helpful "i bubbles" for guidance on how to fill out the log. New properties may need to be entered in manually until they are added into the system. The system requires reporting of herbicide use which is important for DNR reporting purposes. There is also an optional map to show the area worked in. This map is needed if herbicide is applied and may be helpful for determining past project success. We encourage filling out the map unless making a map for the project is not helpful or does not make sense.

Another feature of the volunteer work log is that you can enter a range of dates in so if a project is taking place over the course of a couple of months only one entry needs to be made. You can also search for previous entries using the search function and export those searches into an excel document for easy data use and to see what was previously entered in. It is also possible to edit mistakes or changes with a log-in and password provided by the regional volunteer coordinator.

Data from the log is used to determine individual hours for t-shirts and hats so the more detail of names of volunteers entered the better. Stewards, workday leaders, and individual volunteers are responsible for entering or delegating someone to enter information for their properties in the correct manner. This information should be kept as up to date as reasonable with a deadline of December 1st for the current year's activities.

References:

The Nature Conservancy

Williams, B. 2011. "The Stewardship Manual." Draft.